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AUTHOR Frataccia, Enrico V.; Frataccia, Priscilla Kaye
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ABSTRACT

A student project was designed to promote the development of critical reading, critical thinking, and study skills in seventh grade honors students in a developmental reading program. Inherent within the design of the project was the notion that the students would select a topic of interest to research, thereby enhancing student motivation and their readiness to learn. During the second and fourth six-week grading periods of an academic school year, the students engaged in research units developed by their developmental reading teacher and a university professor. The research units, covering the entire six weeks of each grading period, consisted of seven steps and associated tasks that students were required to finish in sequence in order to complete the entire unit. The skills emphasized were gathering information, notetaking, outlining, organization, analysis of information, drawing conclusions, making judgments, predicting outcomes, and distinguishing between fact and opinion. In addition, converting outlines to paragraph form required teacher-directed review of formal writing skills. The projects received positive feedback from both the students and the educators who were shown the projects. (RL)

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Enrico V. Frataccia
Priscilla Kaye Frataccia

UTILIZING STUDENT RESEARCH TO ENHANCE CRITICAL READING/ THINKING AND STUDY SKILLS IN THE JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

Reading teachers and educators, in general, have often been critized for promoting the rote learning of reading and not placing enough emphasis upon comprehension and problem solving skills affiliated with critical reading. Evidence suggests that the teaching of reading relative to comprehension has suffered considerably. Durkin (1978-1979) reported that the teaching of comprehension took place less than one-percent of the time allocated for reading.

Reading is a critical component of the curriculum in America's schools. Brophy and Good (1980) substantiate the previous contention in reporting that "children who never learn to read functionally are going to have difficulty in reading and other subjects for the rest of their school years."

Learning to read requires that students be provided opportunities to develop skills within the three basic structural components of reading: word recognition, comprehension and study skills (Cooper, Warncke, et al 1979). As previously mentioned, emphasis upon comprehension-instruction has been neglected in a number of selected classrooms.

A reduced emphasis upon comprehension-instruction will also have an adverse effect upon helping students develop critical reading/thinking skills which are components of comprehension. Cooper, Warncke, et al (1979) report the following in terms of critical reading/thinking and comprehension:

> ...Unfortunately, critical reading/thinking is a comprehension skill that does not always receive the degree of attention it should in the area of reading instruction. In fact, teachers devote little time in helping students develop the skills at this level of comprehension.

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This project was designed to promote the development of critical reading/thinking and study skills of seventh grade, honors students in a developmental reading program. Inherent within the design of the project was the notion that students select a topic of interest to research. Student interest was emphasized to enhance motivation and promote readiness to learn. Bigge points out that "we can only assume that when a person is ready for a new learning, it is because he (she) has developed his ability and interest to the point that he sees the new learning as the next step for him to make."

PROCEDURE

During the second and fourth grading periods of the academic school year, seventh grade, honors students engaged in a research unit developed by their seventh grade developmental reading teacher and a university professor. The research unit covered the entire six week grading periods previously mentioned.

The research unit was initiated by giving the students a research unit study guide. The study guide consisted of seven steps and associated tasks students were required to finish in order to complete the entire unit.

Completion of the tasks associated with step one was a prerequisite for initiation of tasks associated with step two, and so forth. Furthermore, direct teacher instruction was provided for each skill which related to the tasks students were required to complete in each step of the research unit. The skills emphasized were: gathering information, notetaking, outlining, organization, analysis of information, drawing conclusions, making judgements, predicting outcomes, and distinguishing between fact and opinion. In addition, converting outlines to paragraph form required teacher-directed review of formal writing skills.

The research unit study guide reflected a thesis format. The thesis format is not novel. However, its use within the context of a seventh grade, honors developmental reading program is not common. The thesis format was used to promote critical reading/thinking and study skills. This was accomplished directly in Chapter 3 (analysis of information) which required students to apply critical reading/thinking and study skills, and thereby inhibiting research via copying information from sources such as the encyclopedia. The research unit study guide is illustrated in Figure 1.

RESULTS

The projects developed by the seventh grade pupils were indeed inspirational. That is, when the projects were completed and displayed they were viewed by the school's principal "I didn't know seventh graders could do this sort of work," vice principal and parents "Johnny has always wanted to be a doctor," with considerable pride. Simultaneously, they were viewed by university pre-service educators with a certain amount of disbelief, "seventh graders did these," university professors with a certain amount of awe, "it's amazing what kids will do for a teacher they respect."

It was not the intent of the research unit to inspire responses from either of the above mentioned parties. Once again, the research unit was intended to help students develop critical reading/thinking skills and stimulate motivation to learn by capitalizing upon student interest.

A critical question, then, is "did the students perceive that capitalizing upon their interests to do a research project helped them learn?" A survey was designed to elicit student responses concerning the worth of the research unit. Results are depicted in Figure 2.

Student responses to survey questions seven and eight are particularly enlightening. Keep in mind that the students who engaged in this research unit were honors students and therefore academically capable. Of the twenty-five students who responded to question seven, only nine (36%) reported having a similar previous experience. Of the nine students who reported prior experience, eight indicated the experience occurred during their previous school year, in sixth grade science. Equally important is the notion that sixteen (64%) of the seventh grade honors students reported having no similar previous experience.

Student response to survey question four appears to reinforce the importance of interest to enhance motivation to learn. The first time the students completed the research unit, twenty-three (92%) students indicated that doing research on something of interest helped them learn. The second time the students completed the research unit, twenty-five (86%) students indicated that doing research on something of interest helped them learn.

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Student responses to survey questions five and six were also particularly interesting. One hundred (100%) percent of the students responded that either friends or family members knew about the research

the students were engaged in. Also, twenty-five (85%) students reported that either their friends or family members were interested in the students' research project.

How often should student be provided opportunities to engage in and complete a research unit similar to that employed in this study? Student responses to survey question number four suggests that twice a year is appropriate for most students. For example, after completion of the first research unit, twenty-one (84%) students indicated they would like to continue doing research on something of interest. However, after completion of the second research unit, fourteen (50%) students indicated they would like to continue doing research on something of interest.

Involving an entire class in a research unit of this magnitude, more than twice a year, may be a difficult task. For example, provisions may need to be made to allow those students who do not desire to continue doing research to engage in either alternative activities or modifications of research unit activities.

DISCUSSION

Teacher observations of student behavior during the time this unit was being implemented add additional insight into the academic and emotional results of the project.

Initially many of the students expressed frustration and fear of such a momumental and unknown task. They asked many questions and seemed to be afraid they could not complete the assignment. Blended with fear and frustration, however, there was a great deal of excitement in generating ideas and finding new information. Because of the sequential organization of tasks and short term goals that were met one by one, the fear was

gradually alleviated and replaced with interest in the data that was being collected.

As students completed their projects, the first reaction was an obvious sigh of relief, but a short time later they were able to share experiences and ideas with friends. There was a tremendous amount of pride in their work which generated self-respect. They were proud of the recognition received from parents, other students and administrators. As a teacher I found it very rewarding to see the students respect themselves, their work and to feel they had had a rather unique experience.

FIGURE I
RESEARCH UNIT STUDY GUIDE

OVERVIEW: You will research a specific topic of your choice. Your completed paper will have 4 sections or chapters. The 4 chapters will be: 1) Proposal, 2) Review of the Literature, 3) Analysis of the Information, and 4) Summary. The procedure you are to use is described below.

STEP 1: Proposal (Chapter 1)--This chapter should be written in paragraph form and should tell what you propose to do.
- a. What topic do you plan to research?
- b. Why do you think this topic is important enough to study?
- c. List at least three questions which you would like to answer as a result of your research.

STEP 2: Review of the Literature (Chapter 2)--This chapter should include all of the information that you find as a result of your research. You must keep a separate BIBLIOGRAPHY that lists the different resource materials that you use.
- a. Locate at least three books to use for gathering information.
- b. Locate at least two resources besides books (they may include: magazines, films, pamphlets, interviews, etc.).
- c. Write at least one letter to a person who is an expert on your topic. Include questions to which you would like to find answers or obtain an expert's opinion.
- * As you locate your information, you must keep notes on the things that you learn. Index cards are to be used for this purpose. Your index cards must include the resource from which you got the information and no more than one major piece of information.

STEP 3: Organizing Your Note Cards
- a. Read through all of the note cards that you have collected.
- b. Organize your note cards in a logical way. (For example: if you are studying the Energy Problem you might organize your cards as follows--)
  1) Put all of the cards together which define different types of energy. (gas, coal, solar, etc.)
  2) Put all of the cards together which describe the availability of each type of energy.
  3) All cards which describe the advantages of each type.
  4) All cards which describe the disadvantages of each type.
  5) All cards with opinions of experts.

  Continue in this manner until all cards have been grouped into categories.

STEP 4: Getting your information on paper
- a. Write up the information you have on your note cards in outline form. Keep them in the same logical order.
- b. Convert your outline to a report written in paragraph form.

YOU HAVE NOW FINISHED CHAPTER 2!!!

STEP 5: Analysis of the Information (Chapter 3)--In this chapter you will be looking at the information that you collected and making some judgements, evaluations, and some criticisms. For example: If you were working on the Energy Problem you should begin to analyze the problems and solutions. Here are some things you might think about--
- a. What brought about this problem? (Background of the problem)
- b. Are there answers or solutions to each question that you asked in your proposal? If so, give at least one answer or solution to each question. If you could find no answers or solutions, give at least one reason why.
- * Just as you did in Chapter 2, you must first write your first draft in outline form, then convert the outline to a report written in paragraph form.

YOU HAVE NOW FINISHED CHAPTER 3!!!

STEP 6: Summarizing your paper (Chapter 4)--In this chapter you must summarize the major points that you made in the first three chapters.
- a. Restate the questions that you intended to answer.
- b. Briefly restate some of the major information that you found.
- c. Briefly restate your analysis of the problem.
- d. Give any of your own opinions about the topic.

YOU HAVE NOW FINISHED CHAPTER 4!!!

STEP 7: Bibliography
- a. List all of your resources in alphabetical order by the author's name.
- b. Include--title, publishing company, date published, and the page that you used.

HERE'S HOW YOU WILL BE EVALUATED:
Grade 1 -- Proposal
Grade 2 -- Note Cards (after you have organized them in Step 3)
Grade 3 -- Outlines of Chapters 2 and 3
Grade 4 -- Final Written Report (must be in ink, on one side of the paper, organized by Chapters 1-4)

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FIGURE 2

STUDENT RESPONSES TO RESEARCH UNIT SURVEY

STUDENT RESEARCH PROJECT QUESTIONS	STUDENT RESPONSES TO SURVEY AFTER COMPLETING RESEARCH PROJECT MBER ONE AND NUMBER TWO					
1. Please give one reason why you wanted to research this topic.	TOPIC WAS INTERESTING		FIND OUT INFORMATION ABOUT AN OCCUPATION		JUST WANTED TO KNOW MORE ABOUT TOPIC	
	18 (72%)	15 (52%)	2 (8%)	4 (14%)	5 (20%)	10 (34%)
2. Now that you have finished your research, would you like to know even more about the topic?	YES				NO	
	20 (80%)	17 (61%)			5 (20%)	11 (39%)
3. Do you think that doing research on something you are interested in helps you learn better or doesn't it make much difference?	HELPS TO LEARN BETTER				DOES NOT MAKE MUCH DIFFERENCE	
	23 (92%)	25 (86%)			2 (8%)	4 (14%)
4. Would you like to continue doing research on something you are interested in or is it too much work to do more than once a year?	YES				NO	
	21 (84%)	14 (50%)			4 (16%)	14 (50%)
5. Do any of your friends outside of class or any of your family members know that you are doing research?	YES				NO	
	29 (100%)				0 (0%)	
6. If so, are your friends or members of your family interested in your research project?	YES				NO	
	25 (86%)				4 (14%)	
7. Have you ever done research like this before?	YES				NO	
	9 (36%)				16 (64%)	
8. If you have, when was it?	8 students did research projects in 6th grade science, 1 student in 5th grade Social Studies					

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